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Michael Baltutis

University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, baltutim@uwosh.edu

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Constructing the New Nepal: Religious Billboards in Nepal's Second People's Movement

Michael Baltutis

Accompanying King Gyanendra's February First, 2005, efforts to consolidate his loosening grip on national power, the royal Nepali government raised a series of highly visible billboards throughout the cities of the Kathmandu Valley. A small subset of these boards were explicitly religious, encouraging Nepal's citizens to perform their patriotic *bhakti* (devotion), *karma* (action), and *dharma* (duty). This rhetorical support of a 'universal' Hinduism contradicted the inclusivism that was widely regarded as part and parcel of the 'new Nepal' and resulted in a contradictory vision of the same: a modern secular nation composed of citizens, rather than of subservient subjects, unified by and working together with a Hindu monarch for the betterment of the nation.

This conflict contributed to the widespread skepticism with which these signs were met, indicated by the multiple acts of graffiti, vandalism, and outright destruction brought against them, and by their removal by the

royal government fifteen months later. This paper will detail the form and content of these religious billboards and argue that this religious language was one of the reasons behind their failure to deliver a message amenable to the middle class citizens of Kathmandu, as diverse parties throughout contemporary Nepal worked to define the multivalent 'new Nepal.'

Keywords: Nepal, politics, religion, media, royalty.

Introduction

“It is our faith that we will all join together for the construction of a strong and successful new Nepal that is firmly committed to constitutional monarchy and multiparty democracy.”

sarṁvaidhānik rājtantra ra bahudalīya prajātantra
jagmā adiera sabal ra samunnata nava nepāl nirmān
mā hāmī sabai juṭnu pardcha bhanne hāmro viśvās
cha

– Billboard on Kathmandu’s Kanthipath Road, attributed to Śrī 5 Gyānendra

The multivalent term ‘new Nepal’ (N. *nayā Nepāl*) used in the billboard quoted above has become the watchword of parties in many quarters of Nepali society to name the social, developmental, and political processes currently at work in post-monarchical Nepal.¹ Due to the official processes of bringing to an end the Nepali monarchy in 2006–2008 and the absence of a constitution since 2006, many citizens anticipate this desired ‘new Nepal’ while transitioning from an implied ‘old Nepal,’ a nation that was ruled by an active monarchy and racked by a decade-long civil war with Maoist rebels. The issues at stake in the new Nepal are generally those that had been rejected in the forty-point demand that the Maoist party had attempted to negotiate in 1996: nationality, democracy, and livelihood (Hutt 2004: 5, 285–287). Similarly, scholarship on the new Nepal, in positing and predicting the nation’s trajectory, builds off of these same concerns, taking up such additional issues as freedom of the press (Hutt 2006), the political power of indigenous groups (Hangen 2007), the role of informal institutions in the political exclusion of marginalized groups (Lawoti 2008), the sociology of the conflict itself (Lawoti and Pahari 2010), and the 1990 Constitution that reinforced the institutional problems to which Maoist rebels and social and ethnic activists responded (Malagodi 2013).

Much of this scholarship specifically utilizes the term ‘new Nepal’ as it accounts for, projects, and occasionally prescribes the characteristics of the democratizing nation and largely focuses on the concept of inclusion (N. *samābeśi*) that counters the “monolithic” Nepal whose constitution “had been blamed for institutionalizing, legitimizing, and engendering patterns of exclusion and discrimination” (Malagodi 2013: 3).² In his 2010 book *New Nepal: The Fault Lines*, strategic analyst Nishchal Pandey describes the new Nepal as an “inclusive and democratic” nation that includes “the concept of federalism based on ethnicity” (Pandey 2010: 38, 44). The new Nepal, Pandey writes, represents a “‘positive transformation’ of the state from

a centralized, unitary, feudal rule of only a certain privileged section of the society to an inclusive, federal and a truly democratic republic...” (Pandey 2010: 2). Similarly, journalist Rita Manchanda emphasizes the shift in national conflict from one between monarchy and democratic forces to one dealing with ethnic and regional issues where inclusion becomes key (Manchanda 2006: 5035; Manchanda 2008; Snellinger 2009). In separate articles on the education and performance of Maoist rebels and organizations, Kristine Eck (2010: 44) and Amanda Snellinger (2010: 80) see a welcoming of traditionally excluded groups and individuals as one of the primary features of the new Nepal desired by opponents of the Nepali monarchy. Despite the high degree of consistency among these applications of the term, Mahendra Lawoti and Anup Pahari warn that it functions as little more than a metaphor that entails “no more than a skeletal consensus on what a ‘New Nepal’ means in practical terms, or how to get there” (Lawoti and Pahari 2010: 319). The new Nepal, then, represents the process of constructing a nation along more openly democratic lines more than it represents any single static moment in time.

Before its dissolution, Nepal’s royal government communicated its own vision of the new Nepal through its installation of 149 billboards displayed throughout the cities of the Kathmandu Valley. The Department of Information installed these boards immediately following the State of Emergency that King Gyanendra declared on 1 February 2005; citing the 1990 Constitution, Gyanendra assumed absolute power of the country and suspended freedoms of speech and assembly in a bid to end the decade-long civil war with the Maoist rebels and to bring together the seven main democratic parties. These billboards thus constituted one piece in Gyanendra’s attempt to consolidate state power in the palace by communicating his vision of the new Nepal, a vision outlined in his February First proclamation that provided the original source for many of the messages inscribed on these boards (Government of Nepal 2005).

Though the messages outlined on these boards touched on the most pressing and publicly discussed issues of the day, namely those contained in the Maoists’ forty-point demand, a small number contained explicitly Hindu religious language: *bhakti*, *karma*, and *dharma* (devotion, action, and duty). The Hindu rhetoric contained in these boards does not represent the religion actually practiced throughout Nepal, but rather prescribes a suitable religio-political ideology for Kathmandu’s developing middle class at a time of crisis for the Nepali monarchy. In analyzing the installation, socio-political role, and materiality of these royal billboards, I am considering them as a part of the Nepali *ijjat* economy. Mark Liechty describes this as a moral-material

economy whose “regimen of orthodox practices ... marks out a new middle space between tradition and modernity” (Liechty 2003: 84). Dealing more specifically with religion, I also have in mind the “middle class religiosity” that Robert Orsi refers to in his work on Catholic practices in major American cities, with its “[s]anitized, carefully bounded and contained notions of spirituality, religion, or faith...” (Orsi 1985: xviii).³

The sanitized language of *bhakti*, *karma*, and *dharma* in Gyanendra’s billboards conflated religious performance with political practice. Incorporating a generalized form of a universal Nepali Hinduism, it suggested the “regimen of orthodox practices” required for the residents of a modern nation-state. The “sanitized” Hinduism promoted in these boards targeted the urban middle class citizens of Kathmandu, an educated and upwardly mobile demographic concerned with “the material and ‘realist’ logics” (Liechty 2003: 182) that comprise the socio-economics (free-market economy), politics (multiparty representative democracy), and identity (neoliberal self) widely envisioned in the new Nepal (Kunreuther 2010). Though not necessarily reflective of diverse local realities, specifically those outside Kathmandu, this language possessed the potential to fill the relative void left by the weakening of specifically Hindu religious elements formerly associated with Nepal’s constitution and monarchy. These elements include the ban on cow slaughter and on proselytizing; the promotion of Hindu religious festivals, religious discourses, caste hierarchy, and Sanskrit education; and the Hindu monarchy itself (Sharma 2002: 22). As these billboards prescribed, Nepali people, now citizens of equal standing in a modern nation-state rather than subservient and stratified subjects of a medieval monarchy, might fulfill their quasi-religious duty through their support of human rights, of the Nepali state and its security forces, and of the nation’s modernization and development.

Rather than focusing on the bottom-up rhetorical and performative tactics that form the core of studies on Maoist rebels, political parties, and informal institutions in contemporary Nepal, this essay contributes to ongoing conversations about political power, language, and media by exploring the royal Nepali government’s attempt to deploy this type of religiosity from the top down. Seira Tamang’s critique of “the imposition of explanatory categories from above” applies well here, as these billboards reproduce the “disempowering manner in which ostensibly ‘democratizing’ principles or objectives are actually wielded in Nepal” (Tamang 2002: 315–316). Thus, despite references to development and modernity, the religious language contained in Gyanendra’s billboards continued to support the exclu-

sion that had been enshrined in the ‘old Nepal,’ especially in King Mahendra’s 1962 Panchayat Constitution, which established Nepal as a ‘Hindu kingdom.’ This continuity with Nepal’s past contributed to the ultimate rejection of these boards fifteen months later amidst the April 2006 *jan andolan*, the nationwide movement during which tens of thousands of Nepalis protested the king’s autocratic grasp at power. Widely vandalized by the Nepali public, these boards, ultimately removed by the Nepali government, signaled the rejection of Gyanendra’s vision of the nation described within these boards.

This essay will be divided into three sections, each of which will contain an epigraph that, bearing the content of one of the billboards, will introduce the content of that section. The first section will introduce the form and content of the billboards, the socio-political context of the new Nepal in which they were raised, and the middle class audience to which they were directed; the second section will detail the content of the religious billboards; and the concluding section will address the role of religion in the ‘new Nepal’ and will reflect on the rejection of the billboards within the larger setting of the iconoclasm seen through-out the second *jan andolan*.

Modern, Middle Class Billboards

“Fruitful democracy is the true ‘people’s doctrine.’”

saphal prajātantra nai
sakkali janavād ho

– Billboard on Kathmandu’s Kantipath Road, attributed to Śrī 5 Gyānendra

In his work on middle class modernity in Kathmandu, Mark Liechty establishes the middle class of Nepal’s largest city and capital as not significantly different from middle class populations anywhere in the developed or developing world. Like the new Nepal itself, middle classness is not a status to be attained once and for all, but a fluid social process; relative to the “large population of urban poor” below and the “small transnational elite” above, the middle class is “a constantly renegotiated cultural space . . . in which the terms of inclusion and exclusion are endlessly tested, negotiated, and affirmed” (Liechty 2003: 4, 16). Members of the aspiring middle class perform this negotiation of inclusion and exclusion through a variety of related means: their consumption rather than production of commodities; their rhetorical emphasis on honor, personal achievement, and responsibility that transcends traditional vocabularies; and their use of “local caste logics and other religiously based notions of propriety and suitability that, in turn,



Figure 1. "Fruitful democracy is the true 'people's doctrine.'"

(Michael Baltutis, 2006)

shape middleclass discourses of honor and prestige" (Liechty 2003: 14, 20). All of these practices and many more work to ground such values as "the material and 'realist' logics of consumerism, labor, democracy, freedom, individual achievement, and responsibility" (Liechty 2003: 182).

The form and content of these royal billboards supported this middle-class modernity by consistently referencing these negotiated characteristics and of the active role that their audience was to take in the construction of new Nepal. Each sign contained a message in formal Sanskritized Nepali, around which was placed a set of emblems and phrases identifying its royal source.⁴ The lower left-hand corner of each board was marked with the name of the governmental agency responsible for its publication, Śrī 5 ko Sarkār Sūcnā Vibhāg (the Royal Government's Department of Information). On either the far left or far right of each sign was an oval containing an emblem of either the royal crown or the flag of Nepal. Finally, the lower-right hand corner contained the name of the royal figure to whom the message was attributed; in most cases this is either Śrī 5 Gyānendra or Sva. Śrī 5 Birendra.⁵ Immediately following Gyanendra's 2006 reinstatement of Parliament, these phrases acknowledging royal authorship were routinely covered over or erased, the public's most consistent method of defacing the billboards (Ranjitkar 2009).

Gyanendra was not the first to use the medium of the billboard for the dissemination of political information.

The same form was used by Gyanendra's father, King Mahendra, in the relatively media-free society of late nineteen sixties Nepal, to communicate "propaganda and publicity emphasizing the traditional role of the monarch as a symbol of national unity and as a centre of loyalty for various ethnic groups" (Shah 1990: 7).⁶ Though the content of Mahendra's messages has not, to my knowledge, been preserved in any systematic way, several fragments do exist. Fran Hosken provides one example in her 1974 photographic survey of changing life in the Kathmandu Valley: a family-planning poster from the city of Patan that shows a family of four (mother, father, son, and daughter) with the slogan "Sano parivar, sukhi parivar" ("A small family is a happy family") (Hosken 1974: 285). The main characters in Samrat Upadhyay's 2006 novel *The Royal Ghosts* reflect on the rather insipid content of this first generation of royal billboard. When Rumila advises Suresh to "focus on the present and the future" rather than on the past, Suresh jokes that "she sounded like the so-called Supreme Pronouncements of the kings that were scrawled on billboards across the city: 'Use your hands, not your mouth, to build your country.' 'Our Nation, Culture, King—dearer than our own life.'" Rumila responds that her favorite billboard was "the one in English that exhorted drivers to be Better Late Than Never—and this in a country where most people barely knew English" (Upadhyay 2006: 83–84). The use of such messages in Upadhyay's novel reflects upon the relative absence of non-sanctioned forms of public communi-

cation in Mahendra's Panchayat-era Nepal, as well as the mild amusement with which his billboards were received (Baltutis 2011: 194). Gyanendra's billboards not only hearkened back to the time of his father when the few media outlets in landlocked Nepal were legally prohibited from challenging the king and his government, but they also visually reinforced his own 2005 ban on all international communication, leaving these boards—at least in theory—as the only messages in town (Onta 2006: 1, 123). Thus, despite their promise of the “beginning of a new era,” as one billboard proclaimed, Gyanendra's messages, in both their form and content, maintained a striking continuity with Nepal's past (Bhattarai 2007).

The content of the 149 billboards can roughly be grouped into seven themes, all of which dovetail with the characteristics described by Liechty above. Multiple boards refer to human rights, opposition to terrorism, civic responsibility, royal responsibility, development and modernization (Nep. *bikās*), integration into a larger world, and multiparty democracy (Baltutis 2011: 196–7). The board quoted in the epigraph to this section and depicted in Figure 1 deals with the broader issue of inclusion that grounds middle class aspirations. The message on this board, “Fruitful democracy is the true ‘people’s doctrine,’” substitutes a much more common term for “democracy,” *prajātantra*, for *janavād*, which I have translated here more literally as the ‘people’s doctrine.’ This message obliquely refers to the major political issue of the day, the ongoing conflict with Maoist rebels, by playing both on the Maoist designation of the “People’s War” (*janayuddh*), the civil war begun in 1996, and on the name of the socialist philosophy of Maoism itself (*māovād*). Using a word that juxtaposes the key elements of these two terms (*jana*- and *-vād*), the royal government stated its preferences for the future direction of the country by asserting that responsible citizens of Kathmandu, rather than the Maoists who had been grabbing many of the headlines, had a significant and even the “true” (*sakkalī*) role to play in the future direction of the country.⁸ This theme of the opposition between the respectable citizens of Kathmandu and the Maoist rebels permeates the entire set of billboards. I believe this is purposeful and intended to collapse any distinction between citizen, student leader, and democratic party member, thus making all non-Maoists ‘suitable’ to assist in the construction of the new Nepal.⁹ Furthermore, the boards place this opposition in transhistorical rhetoric lauding the proper attitudes and responsibilities of the citizens of a “Hindu and Constitutional Monarchical Kingdom,” whose sovereignty is constitutionally “vested in the Nepalese people” (Article 1.3).

Though equal in size and prominence to advertising billboards, these political billboards remained *in situ* for over a year, rather than undergoing the typical rotation of “gigantic effigies of consumption every two to three months” (Note 2007: 138). The general dissatisfaction that resulted in the removal of these signs is rooted, in part, in the uncomfortable relationship they had to the commercial signs with which they vied for public attention. On the one hand, Gyanendra's billboards possessed an eerie stability in an economic milieu that requires the constant rotation of new commercial goods and the means by which they are advertised to consumers, while on the other hand they projected a particular vision of the future all too similar to that advertised on billboards for beauty products, beer, motorcycles, etc. In line with middle class desires for material wealth and status, it was the job of these billboards, overlooking some of the busiest roads in the country, to reform Nepal's citizens and imbue them with a version of modernity more amenable to a twenty-first century Nepal, though one that would anachronistically retain the king as the nation's leader (Baltutis 2011: 195). As I will argue below, the religious billboards in particular performed this same work as they translated the duties of Nepali citizens from political to religious language.

Religious Billboards

“All those who love the motherland should commit as one to making patriotism (*deśbhakti*) our meeting point.”

mātrbhūmilāi māyā garne
sabaile deśbhaktiko milanbindumā
aikyabaddha hune praṇ garaum

– Billboard on Kathmandu's Kantipath Road, attributed to Śrī 5 Gyanendra

The religious language on Gyanendra's state-sponsored billboards avoided reference to any specific religious actions (e.g., the performance of a particular ritual). Rather, references to concepts such as *bhakti*, *karma*, and *dharma* remained general but recognizable as *religious* and supported the royal vision of a new Nepal that would be unified by its acceptance of what Orsi refers to as the “sanitized, carefully bounded and contained” vocabulary of a “middle class religiosity” that would transcend sectarianism and promote inclusion (Orsi 1985: xviii). Thus, rather than constituting a “state-sponsored Hinduism,” as Basu frames the sometimes intimate relationship between Hinduism and royal politics in Nepal (2010: 111), these billboards promoted the socio-economic and political processes seen to be required for the building of the new Nepal. In these

processes, citizens are to actively exercise civic responsibility through their collective support of a democratic monarchy. Thus, one board quoting King Birendra read: “The Nepali crown is for the people, the Nepali people are for the crown, and the king and people are together for Nepal and for [all things] Nepali.”¹⁰

Several recent studies have dealt with South Asian examples of this religious mode, wherein members of a mobile middle class, those tenuously hanging “between the high and the low” (Liechty 2003: 61), negotiate their own terms of inclusion and exclusion through religious media. Examples of this include the construction of goddess temples in contemporary Chennai, the publication of comic books and their consumption in the Hindu diaspora, and the commodification of Hindu *pūjā* (worship) items in Singapore (Waghorne 2001; McLain 2009; Sinha 2011). Philip Lutgendorf provides another such example in his interpretation of the rise of the iconography of and devotion to the powerful *pañcha-mukhī* (five-faced) Hanumān; this “tantrified” deity is a means whereby, “In a Kali Yuga of spiraling consumerism, corruption, and inflation, middle-class worshipers ... desire the ‘quick fix’ of Tantra but within the context of the respectable Vaishnava piety long advocated by prosperous mercantile groups” (Lutgendorf 2001: 288). Associated with both Śiva and Vishnu, Hanumān possesses a “reverence for *dharma* [that] is beyond question,” as he blends Śiva’s “raw and edgy energy with an adamant yogic calm and a Vaisnavized emotional flux. He is, as his devotees often remark with satisfaction, the embodiment of both *śakti* and *bhakti*...” (Lutgendorf 2001: 288). The negotiation of opposing poles of religiosity displayed throughout this scholarship—powerful *śakti* with devotional *bhakti*, and a traditional rural hinterland with devotees’ modern urban lives—reflects the tenuousness of contemporary middle class Hindu South Asia, as its citizens continually negotiate issues of inclusion and exclusion.

The inclusion typically inherent in this middle-class Hinduism tends to be filtered, regardless of the deity central to any particular practice, through a process of Vaishnavization. Meant to assist in the upward mobility of a community, this devotion to a form or characteristic of Vishnu serves several related functions. On the one hand, it emphasizes an orderly social process, seen in Vishnu’s periodic rescue of the world from chaos in the form of one of his *avatars*. It also uses the broad concepts of *dharma* and *bhakti* to negotiate classical and contemporary forms of social organization. Further, it promotes a devotion to “respectable” patterns of social behavior, including vegetarianism (Hawley 2001: 220). Though Gyanendra’s billboards eschew both the more politically conservative components

of Vaishnavization in India (e.g. Hindutvā and Rām rājya in the wake of the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya) and the popular conception of the Nepali king as a form of Vishnu, his focus on *bhakti*, *karma*, and *dharma* participates in the broader Vaishnavization process described by these authors. The functions of this Hindu rhetoric are similar to those of the theistic identifications that Stephanie Tawa Lama notes in her study of political representations of the Goddess in India. In order to legitimize people’s participation in political movements, she argues, politicians: 1. recast an ongoing struggle in familiar terms, 2. draw on the emotional appeal of voters and citizens, 3. translate a political endeavor into a religious mission, and 4. simplify the fight as one of good against evil (Lama 2001: 7-8). Despite the absence of any rhetoric proclaiming the king’s popular identity as Vishnu during the first (1990) or second (2006) *jan andolan*, these four related functions were clearly operative in Gyanendra’s billboards.

In the sign that stands as the epigraph to this section, “All those who love the motherland should commit as one to making patriotism (*deśbhakti*) our meeting point,” Gyanendra utilizes the Hindu devotional term *bhakti* for explicitly political purposes. The compound word *deśbhakti* represents the standard Nepali word for ‘patriotism’ that had been enshrined in the 1962 Constitution: “Devotion to the Nation and loyalty to the State are the fundamental duties of every citizen” (Part 3.9.1). The significance of the Department of Information’s use of this word within the larger context of the billboards goes beyond simple patriotism, however. Appearing on multiple billboards, the term *bhakti* represents one of the standard and most flexible mode of middle class religiosity in contemporary South Asia.¹¹ Moreover, *bhakti* is often connected to a specifically Vaishnava vocabulary that, as Burghart argues, Nepali royalty had long used “in translating the values and ideals of the modern nation-state into the Nepali political arena as well as in defining the legitimate and illegitimate commitment of Nepalese citizens to their state” (1984: 120).

In service of his project of nation building, Gyanendra employed a version of Mahendra’s *deśbhakti* from the nineteen sixties, thus recalling the latter’s official references to ‘devotion.’ Applying “service to one’s redeeming deity” to *deś sevā* (service to the nation), Mahendra, Richard Burghart argues, had further encouraged *deś banāune* (nation building), *deś nirmāṇa* (nation construction), and *deś vikās* (national development). Along these lines, Gyanendra featured a phrase attributed to Mahendra in one of his other billboards as he used his father’s *deś*-centered language: “The goal of democracy is not simply democracy. Rather, its goal is the construction of the nation (*deś nirmāṇa*)



Figure 2. “Exerting great effort, do good work. Action (*karma*) is superior to inaction (*akarma*).”

(Michael Baltutis, 2006)

and of its people” (Burghart 1984: 120). In response to the Western concept of equality, Burghart argues, Mahendra further employed the devotional concept of identity (*samān*), thus identifying the citizens of Nepal as devotees of Vishnu who possess “an identical subtle substance that unites them within the subtle body of Vishnu in the form of Parbrahma” (Burghart 1984: 120).

Despite the absence of any such overt Vaishnavism in Gyanendra’s rhetoric—he included no language that explicitly connected himself or his citizens to the god Vishnu—his message still picks up on both the intimacy and inclusion often involved in *bhakti* rhetoric. The ‘love’ (*māyā*) in the board’s opening phrase recalls, for example, the emotional longing for Krishna of which the sixteenth century *sant* poet Mīrabāī sang in her devotional poetry (Lorenzen 2004: 207). The ‘unity’ (*aikyabaddha*) in the latter part is a representative component of *avarnadharmī bhakti*, a devotionism that “actively opposed the traditional Hindu social and religious ideology of the caste system and patriarchal dominance;” practitioners of this form of *bhakti* often utilize techniques of interior mysticism that “[imply] that all human beings are equally grounded in divine reality, [and] it is often associated with a more egalitarian social ideology” (Lorenzen 2004: 203, 209). The “orderly social process” that Hawley identifies as one of the characteristics of Vaishnavism takes form here as a stable and permanent inclusion that, though sidestepping Mahendra’s “devotional concept of identity” (*samān*) contributes to a collective

devotion to the nation. This idealized stability stands in opposition to the real instability of both urban middle classness in Kathmandu and the opposition that these billboards created between the imagined community of “those who love the motherland” and the Maoist rebels, a dichotomy that permeates this entire set of royal messages.

A second sign reinforces this sense of religious affect doubling as democratic responsibility: “Exerting great effort, do good work. Action (*karma*) is superior to inaction (*akarma*)” (Figure 2).¹³ The concept of *karma*, one of the most fundamental among Indic religions, is “the ‘doctrine’ or ‘law’ that ties actions to results and creates a determinant link between an individual’s status in this life and his or her fate in future lives” (Tull 2004: 309). In the closest example of “theistic identification” in all of these boards, it is Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the Hindu deity Krishna, and not Gyanendra or any other past Nepali king, who occupies the lower-right corner of the sign where the author of the message is identified. Its message, a Nepali translation of a passage from the *Bhagavad Gītā* (3.8a) represents a key moment in the text when Krishna encourages his compatriot, the warrior Arjuna, to perform his proper duty, his *dharma*. The context of this billboard, a decade-long civil war with the Maoist rebels, reflects that of the *Gītā*, a lecture given by Krishna in the midst of a civil war in which Arjuna does not wish to fight against his friends, relatives, and teachers but whose doubts are repeatedly assailed by Krishna’s own recourse to the terminology of *bhakti*, *karma*, and *dharma*.



Figure 3. “As the country belongs to all, our *dharma* is to carry out our obligations [towards it].”

(Michael Baltutis, 2006)

This metaphor of battle was not lost, I presume, on the Department of Information as they worked to unite Nepal’s people against the Maoists and sought to support a *janavād* rather than a *janayuddh*.

The Sanskrit verbal root (*kr*) upon which the Indic word *karma* (‘action’) is based reinforces the active role of Kathmandu’s citizens in yet other boards. One sign, attributed to no particular author, reads: “Direct or indirect support to terrorists is a punishable crime. Rather than enduring terrorism, we should oppose the doctrine of terrorism, and we should provide assistance to those who offer protection.”¹⁴ Though never directly named in these signs, Maoist rebels appear here in the guise of the *ātāṅkakārī*, ‘terrorists.’ The dichotomy between Kathmandu’s citizens and the Maoist rebels that is implied throughout these billboards is made explicit here, with this verbal root providing the suffix for the two opposing sides: citizens should provide assistance not to the *ātāṅkakārī* (‘those who perform acts of violence’) but rather to the *surakṣākarmī* (‘those who offer protection’), the latter referring to the police and army, the agents of state power. Moreover, this sign’s reference to *ātāṅkavād*, the ‘doctrine of terrorism,’ further dichotomizes the peaceful actions of Kathmandu’s citizens, grounded in the ‘people’s doctrine’ of *janavād*, to the destructive actions of the Maoist rebels. Krishna’s reference to *karma* in the *Gītā* reflects not simply the spiritual

conflict that takes place on the “battlefield of *dharma*,” as the *Gītā*’s opening verse states, but also to the action of engaging in a difficult struggle or even a military conflict. More than simply working to win the battle, however, Arjuna’s *karma*, like that of the citizens of Kathmandu, will restore the world to its proper cosmic order, echoing the Vaishnavization process mentioned above.

A third sign, attributed to King Mahendra, uses the concept of *dharma* to speak to the responsibility that citizens of Nepal have towards their democratizing nation: “As the country belongs to all, our *dharma* is to carry out our obligations [towards it]” (Figure 3).¹⁵ The concept of *dharma*—variously translated as law, order, or duty—is, like *karma*, one of the most fundamental and flexible concepts among South Asian religions, and it is this issue that Krishna and Arjuna negotiate as they debate the proper action (*karma*) that Arjuna is to perform on the battlefield. Hindu *dharma* texts from the turn of the Common Era prescribe *dharma* in myriad ways, dealing with everything from the proper activities of a renouncer, to the proper methods of domestic worship, to the proper roles of women. In other words, *dharma* is an open signifier that may be filled with virtually any type of proper conduct. Despite this flexibility, Barbara Holdrege reminds us of its real-world applications: “In its normative dimension, *dharma*, the cosmic ordering principle, finds expression on the human plane in the ritual,

social, and moral orders...” (Holdrege 2006: 214). In this case, we might easily add ‘political’ to Holdrege’s list to categorize the responsibility that the Nepali government is encouraging in its citizens, as it uses *dharma* to translate “a political endeavor into a religious mission” (Lama 2001: 8).

In summary, the use of *bhakti*, *karma*, and *dharma* contributed to, frequently overlapped with, and reinforced the more prosaic and political conceptions of nationality, democracy, and livelihood in contemporary Nepal. Such messages simplified the fight as one between the urban middle class of Kathmandu and the Maoist rebels, thereby reproducing values that are part and parcel of the new Nepal (human rights, development, integration into a modern globalized world, etc.). The messages did this even as the Hindu language inscribed on these boards reinforced the Shah dynasty’s long history of religiously and ethnically exclusionary policies and the “Hindu and Constitutional Monarchical Kingdom” enshrined in the 1990 Constitution.

Though referring to a middle class sense of responsibility and though using concrete and recognizable religious language, these billboards did not communicate any *specific* activity that citizens were enjoined to perform. Rather, they stopped short at merely redirecting the impetus behind traditional devotional performances—temple worship, neighborhood processions, and communal singing—towards political actions performed by the nation’s *bhaktas*, those patriots who are unified in their shared attitudes and practices towards the process of constructing the new Nepal. But, the absence of the *theological* identity between the Nepali king and Vishnu undercut the possibility of a religio-political identity between king and citizen, as Burghart had argued had been the case in King Mahendra’s time. This ambiguity of political identity highlighted the absence of any detailed directive for citizen activity and thus rendered these billboards mere political slogans; the responsibility for performing political *karma*—facilitating development, upholding human rights, and responding to terrorism—then became, especially within the context of Gyanendra’s restrictions on civic freedoms, the duty of the royal government. What remained of the *dharma* of Nepal’s citizens was simply a sense of (*deś*)*bhakti*, of devotion (to the nation), though the inability to know and actively perform one’s duty created the opportunity not just for the active participation in a new Nepal but also for the active rejection of these billboards, of Gyanendra’s February First project, and of the Nepali monarchy itself.

Rejecting the Billboards, Building a New Nepal

“All Nepali people must decide in their own minds on their roles and responsibilities towards their nation.”

pratyek nepālile āphno man mastiṣkmā rāṣṭriyapra-
ti āphno pani kehī dāyitva ra kartavya cha bhanne
bhāvnā rākhnu pardcha |

Billboard on Kathmandu’s Kantipath Road

– attributed to Śrī 5 Gyānendra

A news article on the deteriorating political situation in Nepal following 1 February 2005, published by the humanitarian news service IRIN Asia, asserted that Amnesty International and other human rights organizations were encouraging sanctions against the Nepali government in order to encourage the resumption of democratic freedoms. The photo at the top of this article depicts one of the few English language billboards installed in the city: “Only a meaningful multiparty [sic] democracy can be an effective means of governance by the people.” IRIN’s caption conveys the general response with which these boards were met: “Many have grown skeptical over promises by the king, such as this one posted on a billboard outside the royal palace in Kathmandu” (IRIN 2006). A photo in the English language weekly *Nepali Times* from April 2006 shows a billboard that has been mangled and pulled half-way off of its steel foundations; its caption reads: “REJECTED SLOGANS: Billboards with famous soundbites of King Gyanendra after they were toppled by demonstrators on Tuesday at Ratna Park” (Sharma 2006). Nearly one month after the photo of the mangled sign was published amidst widespread graffiti, vandalism, and destruction of many other signs, and fifteen months after their installation, the royal government removed all 149 billboards. Department of Information official Kedar Bhattarai stated, “We have decided to remove all hoarding boards carrying the king’s quotations considering people’s vehement dissatisfaction against the king during the recent democratic uprising” (AFP). Another unnamed official stated that the signs “gave a false impression that the king was committed to democracy while running the country, despite arresting opposition leaders and cracking down on the media” (AFP 2006). Rather than potentially providing immunity from such acts of destruction, I argue that the overtly religious language in fact contributed to—and almost demanded—their rejection. This rejection was premised on the presumed traditional and Hindu notions of exclusion reinforced therein and their stark contrast to the theme of inclusion widely associated with the building of a new Nepal. The of-

ficial removal of these boards thus represented not simply “dissatisfaction against the king” but a more comprehensive rejection of the idea that the leader of a “Hindu and Constitutional Monarchical Kingdom” possesses the ability to competently develop the qualities—especially that of inclusion—required for the desired new Nepal.¹⁶

By way of conclusion, I consider three other examples of state-sponsored spaces, voices, and images from contemporary Nepal. These examples further contextualize Gyanendra’s billboards by presenting similar communicative and performative techniques, deployed from the top down and in moments of political crisis, that similarly demanded the response of Nepal’s citizens.

In her book *Reigning the River*, Anne Rademacher focuses on the royal government’s construction of a new (and rapidly built) urban park in the neighborhood of Maitighar. This park was built in anticipation of a 2001 visit from an international delegation from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) that just happened to be taking place in the wake of *that* year’s emergency, declared following the royal massacre and increasing tensions with Maoist rebels. Interestingly, Rademacher notes that large public billboards were installed welcoming the SAARC delegates, covering up extant advertising billboards. These official boards, whose messages became the object of literary satire, “blended almost eerily with their ubiquity ... [and] were ultimately the domain of the state” (Rademacher 2011: 205). Equally, the “domain of the state” was the focal point of Rademacher’s analysis, a stone and iron mandala placed as the centerpiece of the Maitighar Park. Reading this object as “a restatement of the centrality of Kathmandu, the national capital and the seat of a still-reigning monarch, in a larger Nepal gripped by revolutionary violence,” Rademacher argues that the mandala was “an iconic symbol of the relationship between the monarch and the national project [that] transformed Maitighar into a spatial rendering of nationhood at a time when the kingship was under undeniable strain” (Rademacher 2011: 122, 123). Though not destroyed outright, the Maitighar mandala provided a similar focus of public protest, as did the billboards at the core of my analysis, erected some five years later. Though difficult to access to by foot, the park served as host to hundreds of groups protesting the royal government and rallying in favor of a “democratic, new Nepal” (Rademacher 2011: 135).

In her work on the language used on FM radio programs in Nepal, Laura Kunreuther contrasts *śīdhā* with *ghumāune kurā*—the “direct voice” of the personal conversations on FM radio with the “talk that goes around” in more official

media outlets. Kunreuther asserts that listeners and callers to these programs are able to use this direct (*śīdhā*) voice as a means not only to give voice to personal and cultural issues they may feel to be too difficult to discuss at home but also to provide “a means of effecting social change,” as this direct speech is “semantically linked to symbols of a new democratic moment, particularly transparency of governance and ‘free speech’” (Kunreuther 2010: 341, 344). The end product of this discursive process—brought about by this directness and by the social change and democracy preliminarily effected—is the development of the neoliberal self, Kunreuther asserts, “one in which the voice and interiority figures centrally as the critical means to reform oneself and society more broadly” (Kunreuther 2010: 342, 346). State-run Radio Nepal is the polar opposite of these FM radio programs and has long been a primary source of *ghumāune kurā*. Kunreuther repeatedly returns to this counter example, noting that the typically male voice of the Radio Nepal announcer is “regulated” and “monotone,” its cadence lacks spontaneity and connecting phatic language, and its use of Sanskritic phrases “evokes an image of highcaste civil servants whose words echo with the sound of the state” and whose words “do not mean what they say” (Kunreuther 2010: 336–345).¹⁷

Finally, Gérard Toffin’s study of ritual power in modern Nepal shows more clearly how the religious content of the billboards at the heart of my study was part of their undoing. Toffin argues that “royal images and ceremonies... can be seen as a constructed performance displaying signs of authority and delivering a visual message” (Toffin 2008: 146). He sets this assertion against the backdrop of the iconoclastic period (2003–2007) that overlapped with the second *jan andolan*. During this period, dozens of statues of Nepali kings were vandalized, demolished, or blown up, without attention to the identity of the king depicted or of his role in working towards constructing a more democratic Nepal (Toffin 2008: 171). Each statue was taken to be a representation of the royal family, and the removal of each and every statue, “the destruction of the old order and its symbols,” was required for “making a new Nepal” (Toffin 2008: 172). Though Toffin asserts that the organization of this royal iconoclasm was largely Maoist-led, the activity and the logic behind it was much more universal. The annexation of the Newar territory of the Kathmandu Valley in the eighteenth century by Gorkha armies and the forcible Hinduization of Tibeto-Burmese-speaking ethnic minorities by more recent Shah kings served as the impetus behind these destructive acts (Toffin 2008: 171). Thus, rather than identifying individuals or groups responsible for the destruction of these royal icons or, in my case, of the state-sponsored billboards, it is this “impetus” within

the “iconoclastic period” that encouraged the myriad examples of vandalism and that resulted in “the destruction of the old order and its symbols.”

The targets of this iconoclasm are, more generally, those edicts and objects that represent specifically Hindu forms of exclusion that have been enacted through official strategies of royal power. Examples of such strategies of Hinduization include the construction of myths and legends about royal families in Sanskrit *Vaṃśāvalī* texts, the publication of the caste-based *Muluki Ain* (National Law Codes) in 1854, the drafting of multiple Nepali constitutions that assert the nation’s Hindu identity, and regular public ritual performances of collective allegiance to a king who maintains associations to the Hindu gods Indra and Vishnu. Much of the scholarship on such public displays by the Nepali state has focused on its conservative function. Subho Basu asserts, “The quasi-feudal monarchical regime used religion to establish its hegemonic ideological presence in the political landscape” (Basu 2010: 112), and other scholars have written of these displays as elements of official propaganda that “propagate,” “promote,” “create,” “legitimize,” “foster,” and “enable” the state.¹⁸ I am considering Gyanendra’s billboards here in a less functional manner, as a means by which the royal Nepali government, at a time of considerable stress, attempted to publicly reconceive the nature of the monarchy and of the relationship of the state with its people and with the wider world, while using a recognizable religious rhetoric and a popular form of media, the billboard, to do so.

The value that these boards possessed was not, I argue, in their ability to “gather spontaneous consent of the subject population to his rule” as Basu asserts (2010: 111). Rather than somehow duping Nepal’s citizens into reaffirming a long-lost faith in the royal government, their potential value was rather in their framing as religious narrative. Had the signs achieved their intended effect, they would have done so by using the universal Hindu language of *karma*, *dharma*, and *bhakti*. Such language would construct a new Nepal more compatible with a continuation of the royal government: a Hindu polity with a mythological dharmic past as well as a modern nation state comprised of devoted and active citizens, with both ruled by a benevolent and democratic monarchy. The hope was that such mutuality of form and content could allow the royal government to discursively display to the urbanizing residents of the Kathmandu Valley the social, political, economic, and religious values to which they had already been exposed and with which they had already begun to negotiate. In doing so, the creators of these billboards aspired to align the monarchy with this new democratic and capitalist spirit glossed in a transhistorical Hindu vocabulary.

Unfortunately for the royal government, the Hindu religiosity enshrined in these billboards carried with it the exclusivity that typified the ‘old Nepal.’ The form and content of the boards too closely resembled the regulated and monotone language associated with other forms of official discourse whose words were perceived to not mean what they say: the Maitighar park that was the “domain of the state,” Radio Nepal that carries the “sound of the state,” and the vandalized royal images that displayed the “old order and its symbols.” Though the presence of these billboards—representing a fifteen-month snapshot in the history of Nepal when the downfall of the Shah dynasty was nearly inevitable—was meant to ground the idealized attitudes and responsibilities of the citizens in King Gyanendra’s vision of the new Nepal, the ensuing iconoclasm directed against them represented a rejection of this same vision: though appearing to be built upon the values of “democracy, freedom, individual achievement, and responsibility,” the rejected Hindu and subtly Vaishnava religious idiom upon which this vision was built served as a visual reminder, rather, of the continuity between king, country, and religion that was part and parcel of the ‘old Nepal’ enshrined in previous constitutions and implied throughout this entire set of royal billboards.

Michael Baltutis is Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies and Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, where he teaches courses on performances and narratives in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of India and Nepal. His research has handled the Indrajaatra festival of classical and contemporary South Asia, the god Bhairav in Kathmandu, and the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata.

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Endnotes

1. Though this term became used much more frequently in the wake of the end of the Nepali monarchy, it had been used since at least 2003 (cf. Acharya 2003).
2. It is to this long-running criticism that Gyanendra appears to respond in one of his billboards: “Local culture is to be recognized as the civilizing elements and as the treasures of any nation’s incalculable wealth” (Lok saṁskṛti nai kunai pani rāṣṭrako bahumūlyā sampattikā sāthai sabhyatā ra sampannatāko pahicān ho).
3. See Sijapati 2013 for the ways that Muslims in Kathmandu negotiated their identities within a Hindu kingdom.
4. The use of formal Nepali is evident even in the first sign listed above, as the Sanskritized “*nava Nepāl*” is used instead of the more colloquial “*nayā Nepāl*.”
5. The Nepali ‘Śrī 5’ [*shrī pāñch*] has no direct English language equivalent, but refers to the ‘fifth-level glorification’ that was originally bestowed upon the Shah kings during the Rana period (1846–1951). The “Sva.” that precedes the name of King Birendra refers to his status as *svargavāsī*, “residing in heaven.”
6. See Burghart 2001 and Malagodi 2013 (89–93, 94–97) on the public use of religious rhetoric by King Mahendra.
7. One dictionary defines this term as: “a political principle in which the supreme administrator must be elected by common people” (Krämer 2007: 60).
8. Another board, quoting King Tribhuvan, reads: “In democracy, citizens possess a great responsibility prajātantra mā nāgarik ko ṭhulo dāyitva huncha |.

9. Personal communication, Dina Bangdel and Ramesh Parajuli.
10. nepālī rājmukṭ prajāko nimti, nepālī prajā rājmukṭ ko nimitta, rājā ra prajā dubai nepāl ra nepālīko nimti.
11. Another billboard read: “In the interest of patriotism (*deśbhakti*) and in the interest of the welfare of the nation and its people, all conflicts should be put to rest, and all solutions based on mutual ill-feeling must be eliminated” (pratyek vivādlāi deśbhaktiko ādharmā suljhāi apsi manomālinyalāi deś ra janatāko hitko ādharmā ṭuṅgyāune pardcha).
12. prajātantra prajātantra ko nimitta nabhaī janatāko ra deś nirmā ko nimti ho.
13. prayatnaśīla bhaera khub kām gara, akarma bhandā ta karma nai śreṣṭha huncha |. The Sanskrit of the *Gītā* (3.8a) reads: niyatam kuru karma tvam karma jyāyo hy akarmana.
14. ātaṅkakārīlāi pratyakṣa vā apratyakṣa sayahog garnu daṇḍanīya aparādh ho | ātaṅk sahanu bhandā āta ṛikabādko birodh garaum, surakṣākarmilāi sahayog garaum |.
15. deś sabaiko sājā ho, kartavyamā lāgnu nai hāmro dharma ho.
16. The Constitution of 1990 stated that “Nepal is a multiethnic, multilingual, democratic, independent, indivisible, sovereign, Hindu and Constitutional Monarchical Kingdom,” but the Interim Constitution of 2007 eliminated all references to religion, asserting, “Nepal is an independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular, inclusive and a fully democratic State” (Article 1.4.1).
17. John Whelpton similarly asserts the counterproductivity of the formal language of Radio Nepal broadcasts, where “many villagers cannot have fully understood what was being said, while for more sophisticated listeners the propagandist nature of the broadcasts was so obvious as to be frequently counter-productive” (Whelpton 2005: 170).
18. Ostrowski 2006: 14; Hangen 2007: 11–12; Basu 2010: 111.

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